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China Holds American As Suspect in Spy Case

By Michael Weisskopf
Washington Post Foreign Service

PEKING, June 1—Chinese security police have held an American graduate student since Friday on suspicion of participating in the theft of "state secrets," the U.S. Embassy confirmed today.

Lisa Wichser, 29, who has been teaching at a Peking school for about 18 months while compiling data for a thesis at the University of Denver, was arrested at 1 a.m. Friday in the Friendship Guesthouse, where she had been living, according to other foreign residents. Detentions of foreigners here have been virtually unknown in recent years.

Neighbors said she was taken away in handcuffs after several plainclothes police searched her quarters. The police reportedly told Chinese attendants that Wichser is a spy working for the CIA who had been under surveillance for two months.

According to several of her colleagues, Wichser began applying to Chinese authorities about two months ago to marry a Chinese economics student whom she met in the course of her work. The Chinese man is said to have been involved in sensitive research.

China's Foreign Ministry issued a statement today saying Wichser had "violated Chinese laws by engaging in activities that are incompatible with her status [as a foreign teacher in China]. She has been detained by our public security organ."



LISA WICHSER
... student seized at 1 a.m. Friday

Chinese authorities have not filed formal charges against Wichser, who reportedly is being kept in one of Peking's detention centers. According to China's criminal code, a suspect can be held 10 days before charges must be lodged.

The U.S. Embassy, which was barred from sending a representative to see Wichser until Monday, has protested to the Chinese government about its handling of the case. A spokesman said the embassy will take "vigorous action ... to assure that [Wichser] receives fair treatment and protection of [her] rights under Chinese law."

The spokesman said the embassy has not been apprised of

the precise allegations against Wichser, although "we understand it relates to the alleged theft of state secrets."

"We are aware this has a broader interpretation in Chinese society than there would be in the United States," he said.

China's communist regime operates in almost total secrecy, revealing information only through carefully managed propaganda organs except for the most innocuous material. Everything from government reports to international news accounts is classified "for reference," restricting distribution to officials of high rank.

Secrecy is defined in the broadest of terms, and the party holds out harsh penalties for misusing state secrets to intimidate officials from dealing openly with foreign journalists, diplomats and scholars.

After a Chinese editor was sentenced to five years in prison last month for leaking details of a Communist Party meeting to a Japanese reporter, the official Peking Review offered this definition of "state secrets":

"Before they are made public, all of the party's private activities are state secrets."

Foreign correspondents and social scientists based in Peking have found it increasingly difficult in recent months to carry out their normal activities of collecting information in this chilled environment.

Except for official warnings and travel limits, however, foreigners generally have been able to work without physical restriction. Although Chinese who regularly see foreigners on unofficial business often get detained for questioning, Wichser is only the second foreigner known to have been held by the ubiquitous security police since the death of Mao Tse-tung in 1976. The first was a Soviet citizen convicted of spying in 1980 and sentenced to seven years in prison.

Wichser, who is said to be fluent in Chinese, is one of the growing number of Americans to come to China since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1979 to work for the Chinese government as copy readers, hospital workers, English teachers or translators.

Wichser, according to her colleagues, came to China in 1980 in the hope of researching her doctoral thesis on the rural economy. She taught English last year to fulfill her work obligation and began teaching an economics course to Chinese college students this year.